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# Is Dimora Delle Balze the most beautiful hotel in Sicily?

*Homespun Sicilian splendour in the breathtaking Val di Noto*

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**First impression:** A beautifully restored 19th-century masseria amid **Noto's** prairie-like scrub and lush, rolling woodland

**Staff:** Real characters, impeccably polite

**Food and drink:** Fresh from the hotel's own farm – a reassuringly compact menu of tasty dishes and cocktails served with swagger

**Bed and bath:** Tastefully executed odes to this old fortified farmhouse with earthy hues and natural materials

**The crowd:** An elegantly unfussy mix of in-the-know Europeans and Americans, here to switch off, drink good wine and settle into this slick design vision

**In a nutshell:** Any tension is subdued inside Dimora Delle Balze's sun-dappled courtyards, its organically resplendent rooms and peaceful pool, somewhere between the mottled greens and golds of UNESCO-protected Val di Noto



Entrance



## Set the scene

A private drive, cutting through fields of bounty, leads to a turreted masseria with freckled grey walls that appear welded into the sun-bleached landscape. A small castello door (from Marrakech) opens to a delightfully serene rabbit hole of Moroccan tiles then **Sicilian** modica-stone tiles, which pave a sandy-hued courtyard. A rusty wrought-iron bed sits in one corner, giant terracotta pots in another, and dramatic views over Noto's golden hills and the farm's woodland are framed by disfigured classical columns salvaged from the abandoned estate. Everything flows: the pastel colours of the communal manor house's three 'salons' into the courtyards which lead through to the pool area: a gorgeous composition of large white umbrellas, palms and flat, glassy water intertwined with the surrounding wild scrub that carpets what feels like an enormous boulder dropped in the middle of the Noto countryside. An organic feel runs through everything from the earthy linen cloths at supper to the peachy room colours, the lilac linen curtains framing the wooden doors and, of course, the tasty kitchen-garden menu.





## What's the story?

In 2008, Elena Lops received a considerable birthday present from her husband: an abandoned 19th-century castle with 60 acres of land, around 15 miles north of the splendid baroque town of Noto in south-east Sicily. Over nine years, she and her family embarked on an extensive restoration project, preserving what they could and bringing the estate back to its former glory, frescoes and all. With input from the discerning eye of interior designer Draga Obradovic (whose training at Milan's Accademia di Belle Arti is easily traced in the quiet classicism), Dimora Delle Balze is a delicate reimagining of the 19th-century estate, one content in its blistered walls and unassuming beauty. The fields surrounding the hotel as part of its farm-to-fork mission serve as a blueprint for slow, sustainable living. Aubergines, peppers, potatoes, courgettes, melons, onions and strawberries are all grown for the kitchen, or are destined for the health-food stores of northern **Italy** as part of Dimora delle Balze's Empasso Ladro project. The honeys and olive oils you spot in reception are either from the farm or made by other nearby estates.

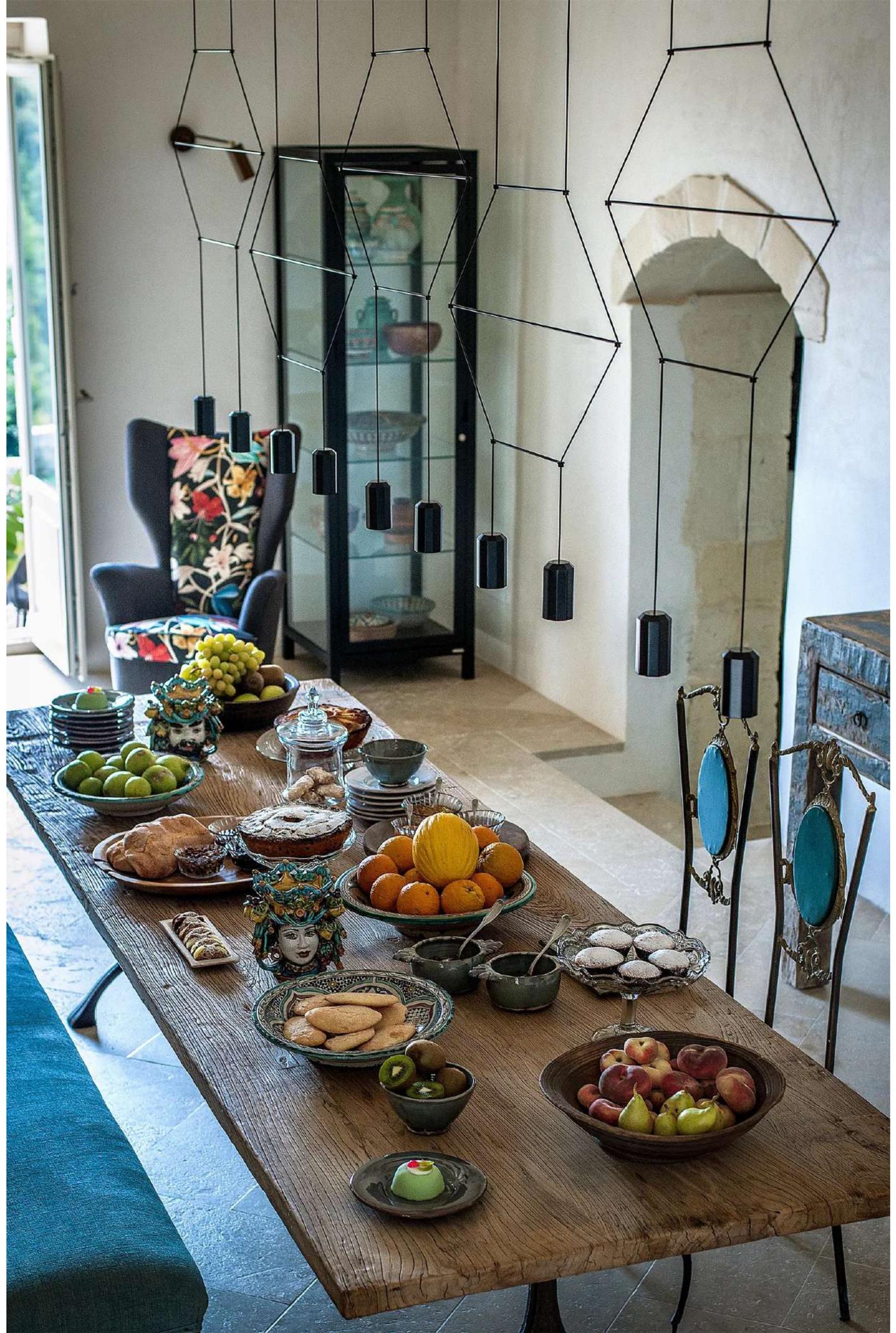




## **What can we expect from our room?**

Spread across the manor house, the outbuildings and stables framing the courtyard and the turreted entrance tower, each of Dimora Delle Balze's cool earthy-hued rooms is different. Some bear more contemporary touches than others, some have sweeping vaulted ceilings, one fills the top floor of the castle turret (much to any romantic occupant's delight) and all have been meticulously choreographed to have the relaxed feel of a [private home](#).

In our case, a faded green door slides back to reveal a Moroccan-tiled bathroom with a double shower, and in some rooms there are stand-alone baths. The lighting is as soft as the colours and materials, illuminating the recovered stone walls, cacti, a rattan chair and a comfy, contemporary bed. Nothing jars or deviates from the elevated homespun feel – pool towels come in a thick, unbranded woven bag (a present for all guests), a tray of Italian cakes from nearby Comiso sits alongside top-rung herbal teas and the hotel's own fragrance lingers in the cool air.





## **How about the food and drink?**

At breakfast crumbling stone columns frame views of Val di Noto from a weathered stone terrace, white tablecloths flap gently in the breeze, and tea is served with flamboyant precision. Inside the manor house, a rustic spread including cornetti, orange cakes, apricot pastries, homemade granola and local cheese covers an enormous industrial-style table. Fresh fruit juices and local soya milk line up neatly along the walls like waiters. Caprese salad and swordfish lunches can be enjoyed poolside, under a vast beach club-style cabana, or along the manor house's long table. Supper tows the organic line, yet with elegant panache: Donnafugata red, delectable caponata, couscous and Parmigiana di melanzane drizzled in the hotel's own olive oil, all served by candlelight.



### **Anything to say about the service?**

The service here slots into that pleasant, friendly zone between stiff five-star and relaxed private home. Ask for a tour of the estate's fields and you'll be hoiked into a truck for a speedy education, ask for a cocktail and it will appear with all the nutty, fruity regalia in minutes, grovel at your late breakfast arrival and they will smile knowingly and pull out your chair.



## **What sort of person comes here?**

Italians and Europeans who have put in the research time before travelling – special-occasion couples and groups seeking exquisite design, as well as a certain grandeur and hedonism devoid of vulgarity.



## What's the neighbourhood scene like?

Pretty spectacular. The hotel sits above a deep valley, with ancient caves built into the cliffs. It's saltwater pool appears to slide into rocky, prairie-style scrubland, which sharply gives way to Val di Noto's rolling woodlands and jagged hills. It's advisable to take accompanied walks around the estate – wild pigs roam these stretches of Val di Noto, but the staff here also have a nose for finding wild asparagus. About 30 minutes north of Dimora Delle Balze lies the splendid baroque town of **Noto**, a labyrinth of honey-hued walls with a grand cathedral,



rustic restaurants and much-loved cafés (notably Caffè Sicilia) that demand a visit.

### **Anything you didn't love?**

Truly scraping the barrel here, but the portion sizes felt extraordinarily generous.

### **A final note: is it worth it?**

Yes, its bucolic position is otherworldly, its organic mission noble, and it has the beguiling effect of an impeccably (not ostentatiously) designed home, demanding nothing more of guests than low-key lounging.

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**Address:** Dimora Delle Balze, SS287, Noto SR, 96017, Italy

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**Price:** Doubles from £114

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